

Ready for Kindergarten

Being ready for kindergarten means a lot more than being 5 years old by a certain date. Parents, physicians and teachers must consider each child's intellectual, physical, social and emotional development.

Hurrying school entrance seldom does much good and often does harm. Teachers say the youngest children in a classroom often struggle the most. These children may feel school is hard, and may be forced to keep up with students who are older and more ready for school. As a result, they may begin to feel bad about themselves and their abilities, and they may also start to see school in a negative light.

The object of kindergarten is to provide the foundation needed for a solid start in education. Here are some guidelines to follow in deciding whether your child is ready for kindergarten.

Ready, willing and able

Your child may be ready for kindergarten if she or he:

- Plays well with other children and is able to share.
- Takes turns.
- Is able to follow directions in a group activity.
- Conforms to simple rules for behavior.
- Feeds herself.
- Dresses himself.
- Manages toileting by himself without accidents.
- Is able to separate easily going from home to school.
- Recognizes symbols and shapes.
- Can sit still and listen to a story for five to 10 minutes and understand it.
- Hears rhymes.
- Sees similarities and differences.
- Speaks clearly enough to be understood.
- Is able to tell stories and talk about his/her own experiences.
- Understands concepts of size and direction, such as large, small, up, down and beside.
- Can adjust eventually to changes in routines and plans.
- Can hold a pencil well and copy shapes such as circles, rectangles and triangles.
- Can recognize basic letters and numbers.

Not ready yet

Kids not ready for kindergarten may show:

- **Poor coordination.** With poor finger dexterity, the child may have trouble with pencil skills. A child who is not as physically coordinated as other children may find physical education activities difficult and feel like

he doesn't measure up to his friends' abilities, which can affect his self-esteem.

- **Psychological immaturity.** The child who can't concentrate, can't make simple decisions, can't wait his turn, can't follow directions and can't remember events may find it hard to handle the school setting.
- **Emotional immaturity.** The child who can't separate from Mom and home will not adapt well to school. Expecting a child to compete in a situation beyond his present capacities may cause him to develop a negative self-image and a desire to avoid all types of competition.

If your child is showing signs of these problems, discuss them with his doctor. There may be things to do to strengthen these areas of development.

If your child is at least age 3 and you are worried about his development or learning, you should ask your local public school system to evaluate him for a preschool program. Age-appropriate activities in preschool can help your daughter with the speech, language and coordination skills she'll need for kindergarten. The social setting is a plus, too. Some of the kids in your child's preschool may be in her kindergarten class, which can make the first day of school a little easier when the time comes.

Ways to make sure

If you're still in doubt, here are some other ideas to aid your decision:

- Pre-kindergarten screening uses a scientific method to determine if your child is ready for school. Your son's physician or your school district may offer this service or be able to refer you to a testing agency.
- Visit the kindergarten your child will attend and talk to the teacher. Imagine your daughter in this setting and decide whether it would be fun, interesting and challenging for her.
- Look for a curriculum and philosophy that reflect the widely varying developmental needs of 5-year-olds. Research shows that children learn through experience, exploration and play — not pencil and paper work. What has your son been doing so far? How would that translate to the kindergarten's format?
- If your daughter attends a preschool or day care center, talk with the staff about how she compares with others. These professionals have valuable insight into how well children from their program do in the local kindergarten.

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- Ask your child's physician to assess his physical and developmental readiness.

The parent's role

Most children who move into kindergarten aren't making a transition straight from home to school. Many kids today have experienced preschool or day care. That means today's kindergartens should have changed, too.

Parents should work with members of the preschool community — as well as the elementary school teachers, principals, school boards and PTAs — to make sure kindergarten offers positive experiences for today's kids. Ask about how many students your school allows in each kindergarten class. If your daughter is easily distracted, a smaller class size might help keep her focused.

If you decide to hold your child out for a year due to his age, use that time well. Enrich your child's life with social experiences with other children. Encourage independence and physical activity. Offer continuous exposure to writing, drawing and storytelling — and lots of play!

If your child is 6 years old and still not physically or emotionally ready to start school, consult your pediatrician and your child's school to fully evaluate the possibility of any underlying emotional, behavioral or developmental problems.